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Curse formulae in South Arabian inscriptions and some of their Semitic parallels

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A curse is a wish, or an invocation to a divine or supernatural power, that evil may befall and injure someone or something. Curses may be expressed in either spoken or written words and are usually characterised by the mention of a supernatural force, frequently the name of a deity (Little 1987: 182-185).

Curses have been used in cultures all over the world and throughout history. Sometimes they figure prominently in a culture, as they do among the Semitic people. Thus we find a variety of curses in written sources in the ancient Near East, such as in royal inscriptions, treaties and burial inscriptions, *etc.*

Curses and blessings, and sometimes the two together, have been the subject of several studies, and have always been a favourite topic for biblical scholars (Batto 1995: 398-405). In general, scholars have concentrated on two basic concepts in their studies of curses, the 'religious' and the 'mythological' conception. Yet, the study of curses should take into account not only their place in popular thought but also other important aspects, such as their content, forms and functions. This means that an anthropological approach is also required. The purpose of this paper is to examine the curse in South Arabian inscriptions. In addition to those attested in burial inscriptions a variety of curses which appear in other types of inscription will also be taken into account.

The South Arabian curses will be examined in light of those in other Semitic languages, particularly those occurring in the Aramaic, Phoenician and Nabataean inscriptions. The curses in the inscriptions of pre-Islamic Arabia are not only very important for an understanding of maledictory practice in the ancient Near East, but provide information on religious thought in ancient South Arabia and illumine the background for the use of curses in Islam.

The purposes of religious curses can be divided into two categories: curses against enemies and evildoers on the one hand and performative and threat curses on the other.

Curses against enemies and evildoers

One of the most important functions of curses is to fend off enemies and their spells. In this case the supernatural power is invoked by someone to inflict injury upon the enemy. In general, the divine appears in the ancient Near East as a power which uses its curses to strike down enemies and punish them (Crawford 1992: 97-155; Steymans 1995: 18-33). There are many examples of deities using curses against their human enemies, namely the enemies of their people, and we have several expressions in South Arabian inscriptions where individuals seek protection from deities as well as rescue from enemies. In the Quran, God is relentless in cursing unbelievers and evildoers, and the term *laʿana* is attested many times. In this, ancient Near Eastern curse traditions seem to have been carried over into the Islamic ethical system.

In one Sabaic inscription the curse of an enemy is

expresses as follows: *ʾlhtm / ḏytʾlhnhmy / šnʾhmw / bʿly / ḥṣy / mrʾyhmw* (J 578/42-43, Jamme 1962: 84), (may the god protect them against) 'the curse that their enemy might pronounce against them in respect of the favour of their two lords' (see Beeston 1972: 351). The term *ʾlh*, 'curse' in this text, has its parallels not only in Arabic but also in Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic (Crawford 1992: 101-106; Steymans 1995: 219*f.*).

The clearest cases of curses in the culture of ancient Yemen can be found in the votive inscriptions. Hundreds of such inscriptions contain a colophon in which the authors of these inscriptions invoked deities to protect them against trouble (Ryckmans 1992: 74). In many examples the deities are asked to protect the people against any malice, magical spells, oppression, calumny, abasement, ill-regard and any spells of an enemy (*šnʾm*) or evildoer (*mhbʾsm*). There are various terms in the South Arabian languages meaning the malevolence of enemies, such as *nḍʿ*, *šṣy*, *ḫṯṯ*, *ṯʿt*, *bʾstm*, *nkytm*, *tgftm*, etc.

The attestation of these terms in their contexts will be presented in the following discussion. However, it is very difficult to give an accurate definition to some of these terms. The people of ancient Yemen were well aware of an enemy's malevolence and malice. The fear that these evil wishes could injure their houses, property, families and crops, seems to have been a fundamental belief in everyday life, The following are just a few examples from the Sabaic inscriptions to illustrate this:

- *wyhʿnnhmw bn nṭʿ wšṣy wḫṯṯ [šn]ʾm wrṯdw hqnythmw rbʿn [yh]ʿn bn ṯbrhw wfʾlhw*, 'and may He (Almaqah) protect them from abasement and ill-regard and magical spells of any enemy. They placed their dedication under the protection of the deity *rbʿn yhʿn* against anyone who would damage it or wish ill to it' (Fa 119/11-14, CIAS I. 48, 39.11/o3, no. 1).

- *wlḫrynhmw ʾlmqh bn nḍʿ wšṣy wṯṯʿ šnʾm*, 'and may Almaqah deliver them from abasement, malice and calumny of any enemy' (YM 438/9-10, CIAS I. 75, 39.11/o6, no. 3).

- *bn ṭwʿ w[n]ḍʿ wšṣy šnʾm wmhbʾsm*, (and the god Almaqah aided and protected them) 'from the power, abasement and ill-regard of any enemy and evil-doer' (YM 350/7-8, CIAS I.83, 39.11/o6, no. 5).

- *wlḫrynhmw ʾlmqh bn bʾstm wnḍʿ wšṣy šnʾm*, 'and may Almaqah save them from evil, harm and malice of any enemy' (J 2107/16, CIAS II. 9, 39.11/o2, no. 2).

- *wl gybhmw bn ḫry wlsn wmʿdw whrm wsḍr kl ʾnsm ḏyšṣyn bhmw bġyr ṣdqm*, 'and he (Almaqah) may protect them from harm, evil spell, spite, misfortune caused by anyone who may curse them without any justification' (CIH 86/8-10).

- *wlhʿnnhm[w ʾlmqh] bn bʾstm [w]tgftm*, 'and may [Almaqah] protect them from evil and oppression" (YM 394/11-12, CIAS I. 71, 39.11/o6, no. 2).

- *wmtʿ ʾlmqh bn bʾstm wnkytm wbn ʿdqm wqmtm wbn mlʾ wḫf šnʾm*, 'and Almaqah had saved them from evil, distress as well as from the evil eye, misfortune and the host and encampment of an enemy' (J 558/4-5, Jamme 1962: 137). The term *ʿdqm* is translated by the Sab.Dic. as 'something against which divine protection is invoked' (Sab. Dic.: 12).

- *wlḫrynhw ʾlmqh bn nḍʿ wšṣy wṯṯʿft wʿbṯt wkfḥ šnʾm*, 'and may Almaqah save them against abasement, the evil eye, slander, calumny and the aggression of any enemy' (J 635/44-46, Jamme 1962: 137).

- *wlḫrynhmw .. . bn nḍʿ wšṣy wsyb wṯṯʿt šnʾm*, 'and may (the god) save them from abasement, malice, betrayal and slander of any enemy' (J 567/26-28, Jamme 1962: 49).

This colophon is characteristic of votive offering inscriptions in South Arabia. In general it is placed after a phrase containing wishes which could be described as a kind of blessing. This means that the curse appears here in apposition to the blessing. Deities in these inscriptions are thanked for what they have done for the people and are invoked to protect these people from evildoers and enemies and their misbehaviour. According to South Arabian inscriptions, it seems that the people of ancient Yemen believed that every disease and misfortune

represented a manifestation of evil caused by an enemy.

Blessings and curses

Blessings and curses in apposition are well attested in the Northwest Semitic inscriptions (Crawford 1992: 157-208), in the Old Testament and in Mesopotamia (Steymans 1995: 177-193).

In South Arabian inscriptions the term *krbt* (*krb*, Sab. Dic.: 79) means 'blessing', and a good example may be found in inscription J 567 (Jamme 1962: 49). In the colophon inscription (lines 22-28), various requests are made to the deity. These begin with the blessing showing the favour of the deity to his people and end with an appeal to protect them against evil.

There is no doubt that this colophon is a very important feature of the South Arabian inscriptions, particularly Sabaic, and it is interesting to see that this tradition has been carried over into the Quran and the Islamic tradition in general. We find a good example for it in Islamic prayers, especially those on Fridays. This *duʿāʾ* 'invocation of God', after the prayer is a kind of a colophon where first the wishes, especially blessings, are requested and then the curse against enemies and unbelievers.

It is also worth noting that only in the Late Sabaean period is the term *brk*, the common Northwest Semitic and Arabic root for 'blessing', attested as a loan word in Sabaic (CIH 543/1).

Performative and threat curses

These kinds of curses were mainly used to protect property, sacral places, objects and memorial monuments.

Sometimes they are intended to enforce the conclusion of treaties, deeds and agreements between persons as well as commercial contracts. This type of curse also has the function of enforcing social rules in the sense of doctrinal discipline, laws and proper behaviour in general. This is shown by the fact that deities were called upon to ensure the lawfulness of laws and to enforce them, and that the names of deities appear in juridical texts, for instance in the Sabaic inscriptions in which the Sabaean god Almaqah was invoked (CIH 126, see Beeston 1951: 305-316). In the Qatabanian inscriptions the deities Anbay and Šams, are invoked (Höfner 1965: 496*f.*, 528*ff.*). One might compare the so-called *suwar rādiʿa* 'punishment suras' in the Quran. There can be no doubt that the invocation of deities in these cases serves as a defence of these laws and agreements and that its intention is preventive. Here the main idea is to enforce these laws and make their validity more profound. It also constitutes a threat against any wrongdoer. The effectiveness of this type of curse is chiefly determined by the character or status of the wisher. That is why the curse of a priest or a prophet, for example, seems to have been very powerful.

The most significant examples of performative and threat curses, in the ancient Near East in general and in ancient Yemen in particular, are in burial inscriptions. These are engraved on the stelae set over graves. After recording the name and filiation of the buried person, in the form X, son or daughter of Y, from the tribe Z, these inscriptions include phrases containing curse formulae or references to his everyday life. Some of these inscriptions contain legal data as well, while others provide information about burial customs (Höfner 1965: 545*ff.*).

Tombs were often the targets of robbery and violence in antiquity (see Parrot 1939: 9*ff.*). It was the custom of the peoples of the ancient Near East to place objects of great material value in tombs, this has, of course, been an incentive to grave-robbers throughout history.

It is therefore not surprising that many burial inscriptions contain curse formulae. It is worthy of note that the curse formulae in these inscriptions are found all over the ancient Near East. It was felt necessary to place curses on tombs to prevent violations and disturbances such as changing the inscription, looting, reusing the tomb, mortgaging it, selling or opening it, *etc.* The curses were intended to constitute a threat against the evildoer in order to prevent him from undertaking such activities. Some contain maledictions against the life and posterity of the violator, and some burial inscriptions contain passages warning that there is no gold and silver in the tomb.

The value of this kind of curse needs to be considered in relation to the power of the deity invoked in these inscriptions, the power of the deity apparently influenced the efficacy of his or her curses. High-ranking deities must surely have inflicted more effective curses than others. Curses may be seen as attempts by the powerless to prevent

attacks on their property, and this is the reason why specific (powerful) deities are invoked to inflict the curses on wrongdoers.

There is good evidence in both Sabaic and Qatabanic inscriptions for placing property under the protection of a deity. Some inscriptions add a curse, in addition to invoking the deity's protection. Among these inscriptions, some indicate that tombs could also be put under the protection of the god ʿAṯtar Šāriqān. Thus, for instance, in a Sabaic inscription which reads: *wrṯdh ʿṯtr šrqn bn ʾns ḫršh w[š]trh* (CIH 450/6-9), 'he put the (grave) under the protection of ʿAṯtar Šāriqān against anyone who may destroy or damage it'.

According to a Minaic burial inscription discovered in Egypt, the sarcophagus was placed under the protection of the Egyptian deity Serapis (Müller 1988: 627*f.*).

Qatabanic inscriptions inform us that graves in Qataban were put primarily under the protection of the deities Anbay (*ʾnby*) and ʾIl Taʿalay (*ʾltʿly*) (RÉS 3541).

In an inscription from Qaryat al-Fau in central Arabia a tomb was placed under the protection of the gods Kāhil, Lāh and ʿAṯtar al-Šāriq. ʿAṯtar al-Šāriq is the equivalent of the South Arabian ʿAṯtar Šāriqān (Beeston 1979: 1-6).

A good example of the anxieties of the people of ancient Yemen over what evildoers might do to their graves is the inscription (RÉS 3884bis; CIAS II. 155, 49.10/p2, no. 1) of the king Yaṣduqʾil, king of Ausān, which reads:

Text

1. *mʿmr / yṣdqʾl / f*
2. *rʿm / šrḥʿt / bn / w*
3. *dm / mlk / ʾwsn / wl*
4. *yḥr / bḏn / brṯn / ḏ*
5. *t / bd / wmlʾt / wʾl*
6. *śn / swḥśs / bn / br*
7. *ṯs / lmʿmrm / bymẓʾ*
8. *ʿlsww / bn / ʾmlk / ʾw*
9. *sn/ ḥg / wqh / ʾbs*
10. *wdm / bmsʾls*

Translation

(1)Eternal monument of Yaṣduqʾil (2)Farʿam ŠararḥʿAtt, son of (the (3)god) Waddum, king of Ausān. (4)Let it stay in this position (5)forever. No one is allowed (6)to carry it away from its place to (7)the benefit of (another) eternal monument which may be set up and put (8)in its place by the (future) kings of Ausān. (9) (This is decided) according to that which his father (10)Waddum ordered in his oracle.

Like other peoples of the ancient Near East the inhabitants of ancient Yemen believed that the protection of the grave as well as its funerary monuments and inscriptions would be ensured forever (see CIAS II. 156). There is no doubt that the people of ancient Yemen believed in an afterlife, a fact which has been confirmed by archaeological discoveries (de Maigret 1997: 165-167; Roux 1997: 169-171; Glanzman 1997:171-177).

In this context it is interesting to reconsider the term *mʿmr,* which occurs in the Qatabanic inscriptions and is usually regarded as a type of funerary monument. The following brief discussion of this term aims to show that *mʿmr* seems to have been used as an expression to protect against evildoers. *Mʿmr* has been discussed by Ryckmans in detail and he translated it as 'memorial monument' (1953: 343-69), an interpretation which has been accepted by most scholars (Höfner 1964: 217-234; Garbini 1980: 55-61; Ricks 1989: 121). The term *ʿamūra,* which is well known in Palestinian superstition as a 'guard or protector of the cemetery', may be relevant to this discussion since it derives from the same root as *mʿmr.*

Anything written was thought to have magical power in the ancient Near East, and therefore written curses were more effective than spoken ones. We have a number of good parallels among the Northwest Semitic inscriptions for the idea of putting the grave under divine protection for eternity. In this context the Northwest Semitic term *ʿlm* is very significant (Nieher 1997: 295-305). One important meaning of this term is the 'underworld', and the phrase *ʿd ʿlm* 'forever', which often appears in the Nabataean and Palmyrene burial inscriptions, illustrates this idea (DNWSI, 859*f*). In the Phoenician inscription of Aḥiram, Ittobaʿl claims that 'He put him (his father Aḥiram) in eternity' (*štw bʿlm,* Crawford 1992: 116-121). Nieher's suggestion to translate the word *ʿlm* as 'Grab' is at any rate plausible (Nieher 1997: 295-305). It is worthy of

note that the term *bt ʿlm* 'grave', literally 'house of eternity' (DNWSI, 160), corresponds semantically to the Qatabanian term *mʿmr*, a fact which allows us to give this term the more specific meaning of 'eternal monument' or 'eternal home'. There is no doubt that the term *mʿmr maʿmar* as nomen loci refers to the afterlife. This means that *mʿmr* is an expression, or a wish, in the religious belief of the people that the grave and its funerary monument, or the monument on which the term *mʿmr* occurs, may remain undisturbed forever.

There is no doubt that the use of a bull's head as an apotropaic symbol in South Arabian art was very important in the life and beliefs of the people (Grohmann 1914: 65-67). Many examples of the bull's head have been found depicted on funerary stelae. In this case the bull's head had the same function of protecting the grave against disturbance as a curse did. This symbol is widely used, engraved or fixed on the funerary monuments of Qataban. Since there is no attestation of curse formulae on these graves, equivalent to those found in Sabaic grave inscriptions, it appears that the Qatabanians used the symbol of a bull's head to protect their graves instead of a curse. Similarly, there were funerary stelae on which only stylised eyes were incised. The eyes do not necessarily always represent the dead person, but may also have had an apotropaic function protecting against the evil eye and evildoers. The proper names of sepulchres may also have had an apotropaic function. The name *ṣwryʾl* was given to the tomb of a Jew discovered in Wadi Tauq, near Hasi (MAFRAY-Ḥaṣī 1, Frantsouzoff 1996: 305). This is the name of an angel well known from Jewish tradition which apparently performs the function of protection instead of a curse. All the devices described above represent magical categories used to protect tombs, but the curse appears to have been the most powerful of all of them.

When a tomb was put under the protection of a deity, it was considered to be taboo. It then had the function of a holy place, just like a temple. It is in this sense that some tombs in North Arabia were declared to be taboo. They had their own sacred area or temenos (*ḥimā*), in addition to funerary monuments which were also declared sacred areas. The pre-Islamic poetry provides information about this and it is interesting to note that tombs were used as places of asylum (Henninger 1981: 172-74).

The following are some examples, primarily Sabaic. All of them are from burial inscriptions:

1. (1)*ṣwr / ġllt / bt / mfdt* (2)*wlyqmʿn / ʿṯtr / ḏyṯbrnhw* (CIH 419)

'Image of Ġalīlat, daughter of Mufīdat. And may ʿAṯtar strike down anyone who destroys it'.

2. (1)*nfs / mḥmd / bn / ḏ* (2)*t / wsʿt / wlyqmʿn* (3)*ʿṯtr / ḏyšṭrnhw* (CIH 420)

'Image of Muḥammad/Maḥmūd, son of the tribe Wāsiʿat. And may ʿAṯtar strike down anyone who destroys it'.

3. (1)*nfs / rbnsrm / rbb* (2)*[y]n / wlyqmʿn / ʿṯtr / šr* (3)*qn / ḏyšṭrn / nfsh* (C 441)

'Funerary monument of Rabnasrum of the tribe Rabīb. And may ʿAṯtar Šāriqān strike down anyone who destroys his funeral monument'.

4. (1)*nfs / mšnʾt / ḏt / ʾgyšm / wlyq* (2)*mʿn / ʿṯtr / šrqn / ḏyšṭrnhw* (CIH 442)

'Funerary monument of Mašnūʾat of the tribe Agyāšum. And may ʿAṯtar Šāriqān strike down anyone who destroys it'.

5. (1)*nṣb / ksm / bn / d* (2)*kʿ / wḥwlm / wly* (3)*qmʿn / ʿṯtr / šrqn/* (4)*ḏyšʾnhw* (CIH 443)

'Graven image of Kasm, son of Dakaʿ and Ḥawlum. And may ʿAṯtar Šāriqān strike down anyone who destroys it'.

6. (1)*nfs / .../ [b]t / wrdm / wlyqmʿn* (2) *[ʿṯtr / šrqn / ḏ]* ... */ wyhbʾsn / bhw* (CIH 444)

'Funerary monument of ..., daughter of Wāridum. And may [ʿAṯtar Šāriqān] strike down anyone [who] causes damage to it'.

7. (1)*ṣwr / wnfs / ʿglm / bn / sʿdlt / qryn* (2)*wlqmʿn / ʿṯtr / šrqn / ḏyḫršnhw/* (CIH 445)

'Image and funerary monument of ʿIglum, son of Saʿdlāt of (the tribe) of Qaryān. And may ʿAṯtar Šāriqān strike down anyone who destroys it'.

8. (1)*nfs / yḥmʾl / mqtwy /* (2)*bn / ḏbyn / wlyqmʿn šrq* (3)*n / ḏyšṭrnhw* (CIH 447)

'Funerary monument of Yaḥimʾil, the Maqtawiy, son of Ḏubyān. And may Šāriqān strike down anyone who destroys it'.

9. (1)*lyqmʿn / šrq* (2)*n / ḏyḫršn* (3)*nfsn / wrṯ* (4)*d / šrqn* (CIH 452)

'May Šāriqān strike down anyone who destroys this funeral monument. And he put it under the protection of Šāriqān'.

10. (1)*nfs / rbʿt / bn / ḥġm / w* (2)*ylyqmʿn / ʿṯtr / šrqn / ḏy* (3)*nhkn / wštrhw* (RÉS 4090)

'Funerary monument of Rabīʿt son of Ḥayyum. And may ʿAṯtar Šāriqān strike down anyone who destroys or damages it'.

11. (1)*nfs / tʿmr / w* (2)*mnmw / yštrh /* (3)*w / wlyqmʿn / ʿṯtr šrqn* (RÉS 4091)

'Funerary monument of Taʿmar. And may ʿAṯtar Šāriqān strike anyone down who destroys it'.

12. (1)*nfs / ḥyw / bt /* (2) *ḥyw / wlyqmʿn /* (3)*ʿṯtr / šrqn / ṯbr* (RÉS 4501)

'Funerary monument of Ḥayyu daughter of Ḥayyu. And may ʿAṯtar Šāriqān strike down the destroyer'.

13. (1)*nfs / ʾbkrb / bn ḫbzt* (2)*n / wlyqmʿn / ʿṯtr / šrqn* (RÉS 4502)

'Funerary monument of Abkarib, son of Ḫabzatan. And may ʿAṯtar Šāriqān strike (him) down'.

14. (1)*mqbr / ddt / bt / wʾlm / bn / mnym / wbr*[ʾ] (2)*hw / b*[*ʿl*]*hw / wškt / wlyqmʿn / ʿṯtr / šrqn /* (3)*ḏyḫšnhw* (RÉS 4536)

'Tomb of Dādat, daughter of Wāʾilum of the tribe Māniyum, which was made by her husband Wāšikat. And may Šāriqān strike anyone down who destroys it'.

15. (1)*nfs / ḥqbšf/ bt / ʾ* (2)... ...... *yt / wh* (3)*bʾws / bn / mlḥm wq /* (4)[*mʿ*] */ ʿṯtr / šrqn / kl / ʾnsy* (5)[*ḫr*]*šn / wyštrn / nfsn* (RÉS 4156)

'Funerary monument of Ḥaqabšāf, daughter .. .. . And may ʿAṯtar Šāriqān strike down anyone who damages and destroys this funeral monument'.

16. (1)*...lt / wyḥym / ʾḥnnn/ wl / yqmʿn / ʿṯtr / šrqn / ḏyštrnhw /* (2)*nfs / mʿnʾl* (RÉS 4389)

'... and Wayḥum (of the tribe) Aḥnūnūān. And may ʿAṯtar Šāriqān strike anyone down who destroys the funeral monument of Maʿnʾil'.

These inscriptions contain a basic formula which is repeated more or less in the same manner as 'And may ʿAṯtar Šāriqān or just Šāriqān strike down anyone (or the person) who destroys or damages the funerary monument or the image'.

The most common term for a curse in the South Arabian languages is the Sabaic term *qmʿ*. This term is used in all of these inscriptions for cursing, primarily in the so-called N-imperfect form: *lyqmʿn* as 'may he strike down' (Nebes 1994: 194), but it also appears in a nominal-form *l-qmʿn* (CIH 445, 969). This has a conditional aspect since it refers to punishment against the person who may damage or destroy the monument. The disturbance of the monument is expressed in six terms which have the same basic meaning of 'damage, destroy'. These are: *štr, nhk, ṯbr, ḫrš, bʾs* and *nšʾ* (see below).

The term *qmʿ* in South Arabian is interpreted on the basis of Arabic. However, there is no indication of the use of *qamaʿa* for cursing in the early Islamic period. Apparently the Arabic word *laʿana*, which is known from the Nabataean inscriptions, was mostly used for 'curse' in that period. It is worth noting that *lʿn* is also attested in the Thamudic and Safaitic inscriptions (see below). The root *qmʿ* itself is common only to Arabic and South Arabian among the Semitic languages. In Arabic this root means 'to tame, curb, bridle, restrain, check, suppress, repress, subdue, strike down'. However, the Arabic lexica also gloss *qmʿ* as *radaʿ* 'restrain, hinder, turn him back, repel, or avert him from the thing' (Lane, 1066). Besides its attestation in burial inscriptions, the term *qmʿ* also occurs in other South Arabian inscriptions. For instance, it appears several times in the context of military campaigns and has been translated as 'overthrow' (Sab. Dic.: 105). The *Sabaic Dictionary* (105) gives only its general meaning, Biella (1982: 458) translates it as 'subdue, subjugate, strike down'.

In this context we should draw attention to the etymology of one of the most commonly used terms for 'amulet' in Aramaic and Hebrew, namely *qmyʿ*. Scholars claim that it derives from a root *qmʿ* with the meaning 'to tie around the Moreshet' (Sokoloff

1990: 496). However, it would be more plausible to derive the term *qmyʿ* from the specific meaning of *qmʿ* in Arabic, namely 'to restrain, to avert', since the common terms for amulet in Arabic, namely *ḥiǧāb*, and the South Arabian *ḥgr*, also derive from roots with this sense. This suggests that the function of an amulet *qmyʿ* can be compared to the action of the deity in Sabaic inscriptions where the deity is called upon to strike down evildoers (*lyqmʿn*) and to avert any danger to graves and monuments.

It thus seems that the usage of the term *qmʿ* in the South Arabian curse formulae carried a specific meaning. It may refer to the power inherent in these curses as spoken words in everyday life or engraved in inscriptions. Apparently *qmʿ* has its parallel in the North Arabian term *laʿana,* which means 'to curse, call down evil upon someone'. In the pre-Islamic period the term *laʿana* actually had the meaning of the expulsion of a person from his family tribe. This means that, among pre-Islamic Arabs, the person cursed would lose all his rights. The dismissal of a person from his community meant that his life was virtually destroyed. It is in this same sense of *laʿana* that we have to understand the meaning of *qmʿ*.

The term *lʿn* was obviously very common in the everyday life of pre-Islamic Arabs. They used it even in greeting formulae to kings and rulers in the form *abayta l-laʿn,* which means literally 'You undertook no evil- doing which could have caused you to be cursed' (Ullmann 1989, article *lʿn*).

In all the inscriptions presented in this section the god ʿAṯtar is invoked. This may be simply because ʿAṯtar, who was worshipped throughout South Arabia, was probably the most powerful deity in ancient Yemen. But is this the only reason? Or was he also called upon because he was the god of the underworld in ancient Yemen? Unfortunately, no accurate data is available on this question. Nevertheless, a few hints suggesting that ʿAṯtar may have functioned as an underworld god. One of his titles is *ʿṯtr bʾsn* 'ʿAṯtar the destroyer', which demonstrates his power (Höfner 1965: 498).

Curse formulae are conditional and are only valid when evil is practised, such as when the grave, or any other property, is attacked, violated or disturbed. Curses are punishments on people who sin against the rules of the community. Since graves were considered taboo, any violation of them was regarded as a sin. The disturbance of tombs is described as a sin in a Minaic inscription (Müller 1988: 624*f.*). The violators have to make offering to the deities.

An important type of South Arabian curse is that which appears in inscriptions on boundary stones (sg. *wṯn*, pl. *ʾwṯn*), which in turn provide us with good information about property and boundaries (*e.g.*, J 540, 541 (Jamme 1955: 265-281); CIH 637). This type of curse has its parallels in the Mesopotamian *kudurru* (see below). Boundary stones were considered taboo and no one was allowed to change their places. This is expressed in a special formula which occurs in these inscriptions as 'let no one remove this monument' (Beeston 1949: 1-3). It seems that the sun-goddess was responsible for the protection of boundary stones, as can be seen by her title *bʿlty ʾwṯnm* 'the two mistresses of the boundaries' (J 664 (Jamme 1962: 168); *cf.* also CIH 457/18). The following is a good example of the threat curse (RÉS 4088; Bāfaqīh *et al.* 1985: 173*ff.*, no. 25):

Text

1. *tqṣw / ʿbrm*
2. *wṯnn / wmn / ʿbr*
3. *ybʾhw / wl / yʾ*
4. *ḫḏ / whm / ʾl / t*
5. *ʾḫḏ / fḫlt / nf*
6. *shw / lḏyhrgnhw*

Translation

(1)Avoid crossing this (2)boundary stone. May anyone who crosses (3)it be seized. And if he escapes (4)being seized, his soul shall be at the mercy (5)of anyone who kills him.

The phrase *fḫlt / nfshw / lḏyhrgnhw* declares whoever crosses the boundary to be an outlaw who may therefore be killed, and is a clear example of the threat of both divine and social punishment in order to protect the boundary stones.

Arabic sources provide examples of the belief in the forces of curses and their efficacy among the pre-Islamic Arabs. They thought that they could avoid them. For instance, Arabs if being cursed would lie on the ground so that the curse may fly over them (Pederson 1914: 77; Wellhausen 1897: 192-195).

Likewise, when the prophet Muḥammad passed by, al-Ḥiǧr/Madāʾin Ṣāliḥ covered his face with his coat to avoid the curse of that accursed place (Pederson 1914: 72, 77), which is associated in the Quran with the statement 'Cursed was Ṯamūd', (*baʿidat Ṯamūd*, Sura 11:95). The term *baʿida* means 'to be cursed, to perish', and here it may be understood as a curse that causes death. It therefore has the same meaning as *laʿana*. Arabs also used to curse a thief in the hope of recovering their stolen property and interestingly some scholars think that the *hiǧāʾ* 'defamatory poem' in pre-Islamic poetry was originally a kind of curse (Pellat 1971: 352-255). Poets in the pre-Islamic period are described as 'magicians' and it was said that they had connections with the jinn. This means that their curses were very efficient.

Finally, it should be stressed that the performative curse would attack its object, namely the evildoer, directly more or less in the same manner as magic. For the people of ancient Yemen these curses were not only words but represented active powers.

Ancient Near Eastern parallels for South Arabian curses

There are many curse formulae in ancient Near Eastern texts that could be compared to those of South Arabia. Thousands have been found in the cuneiform texts, and Mesopotamian curses primarily fall into in two categories: those in treaties and those in monumental inscriptions.

A curse often occurs in association with an oath and sometimes the two are so closely intertwined that they cannot be treated separately. Indeed, in some Semitic languages there are several terms which mean both 'curse' and 'oath' at the same time, for instance the Sabaic term *ʾlh* and the Akkadian word *māmītu*. The Semitic roots *rgm* and *ḥlf* also have such a meaning (Leslau 1991: 229, 465).

Rituals were often performed at the conclusion of treaties in the ancient Near East. Höfner (1965: 504*f.*) has suggested interpreting the term *ḥmrm* as a kind of treaty associated with the killing of an ass, similar to the rituals at Mari. Unfortunately, no accurate data on these customs in South Arabia is available.

A good example of treaty ritual among the pre-Islamic Arabs is the so-called fire-treaty. Arabs used to make a fire and put sulphur on it. They then stayed very close to it and counted the advantages of fire for mankind, thereby laying on anyone who might break the treaty the curse that he should be excluded from these advantages (al-Andalusī: 799*f.*; Fahd 1993: 957-960).

Many treaties from Mesopotamia contain curse formulae, especially treaties which were concluded between kings and vassals (Barré 1992: 653-656). Good examples are the treaties which were concluded between Matiʿʾil, the Aramaean king of Arpad and Bargaʾyah, the king of Ktk, (unknown location). Here the deities not only appear as witnesses to the treaties but their curses are also specifically directed against either party if he defaults. However, this type of curse can also be retributive especially when it accompanies an oath. In this case it has the function of enforcing the treaty's adoption.

Curses were also invoked against law-breakers. Royal inscriptions often contain curse formulae, usually with rival kings or usurpers as a target. A typical example is the epilogue of the codex Hammurabi. Legal documents, both official and private, where curses appear primarily in association with oaths, also exist. In these documents, curses were usually directed against oath-breakers (Sommerfeld 1993: 448*ff.*).

As in South Arabia, the inscriptions on boundary-stones (*kudurru*) in Mesopotamia contain many curse formulae. The function of the *kudurru* was to mark boundaries. No one was allowed to go beyond his own boundary and if he did he could expect to be cursed.

It is interesting that burial inscriptions in Mesopotamia, Syria-Palestine (Phoenician and Aramaic) and in North Arabia (Aramaic and Nabataean) in general have the same type of curse as those in South Arabia. In all of these inscriptions the curse appears in a colophon.

In Mesopotamia, custom demanded that after laying the king in his sarcophagus the lid was fixed with bronze bolts and a label placed on it invoking a curse on anyone who might try to open it. Good examples of curses on graves from Mesopotamia are the recently discovered tombs and treasures of queens at Nimrud (Fadhil 1990a: 464; 1990b: 471-476). In ancient Egypt a disturber of tombs was promised the fate of fighting against crocodiles and

serpents (Assmann 1993: 246-251).

Several Northwest Semitic inscriptions contain curse formulae, for instance the Old Aramaic inscriptions of Sefire and Tell al-Faḫiriyya in addition to the Phoenician inscriptions. Before giving examples from Syria-Palestine it is worth mentioning one which appears in an Aramaic stela at Taymāʾ. It runs as follows: 'and any man who damages this stela, may the gods of Taymāʾ remove him and his posterity from the ground of Taymāʾ' (SSI 30).

Good examples of curse formulae are also found in the Nabataean tomb inscriptions, particularly those from al-Ḥiğr/Madāʾin Ṣāliḥ. The common term used for 'curse' here is *lʿn*, an expression widely accepted as an Arabic loanword in Nabataean (DNWSI: 579) as explained above. The following is an example: 'And may Ḏu Šarā and his throne and Allāt of ʿAmnad and Manātu and her Qayšaha curse anyone who sells this tomb or who buys it or gives it in pledge or makes a gift of it or removes from it body or limb or who buries in it anyone other than ...' (Healey 1993a: 154, Hegra 16 3-6). Some Nabataean curse formulae appear in legal documents and sometimes the violator of the tomb is forced to pay a fine to the deities and the priest (Healey 1993b: 203-214). The fact that a fine for the misuse of tombs is included points to the existence of a dominating central authority. The following curse formulae are attested in a burial inscription from Palmyra: *ʿd ʿlmʾ lʾ yhwʾ lh zrʿ* 'Forever may he have no posterity', *wlḥm wmn lmʾ yšbʿ* 'And may he never have enough bread and water' (Hillers-Cussini 1996: 108). In addition, there are good examples of the curse from Asia Minor (Parrot 1939: 106*f.*).

Curses are also attested in Safaitic inscriptions. Several deities are invoked in these inscriptions, such as Allāt, Ruḍā, Yaṯaʿ, Šayʿ ha-Qawm, Gad ʿAwīḏ Baʿal Samīn, ha-Lāh. These deities are called upon to blind or cause the death of the evildoer. The anxiety of these people seems to have been more for their inscriptions and drawings than for their graves. Nevertheless, curse formulae do appear in Safaitic funerary inscriptions. The following are some examples:

1. ... *whylt mt lḏyʿwr hsfr* '... and O Allāt, death to him who effaces the inscription. (Oxtoby 1968: 154).

2. ... *whylt nqʾt lḏyʿwr* '... and O Allāt may the evil eye be on him who effaces (the inscription)' (Oxtoby 1968: 68).

3. ... *whlt ʿwr lḏyʿwr hḫṭṭ* '... and O Allāt blind anyone who obliterates the drawing' (WH 681).

In addition to curse formulae, some Safaitic funerary inscriptions refer to the declaration of tombs as sacred areas. One reads as follows: 'In the year which he united tombs and made them honoured as a sanctuary of the tribe ʿAwīḏ' (LP 342). This inscription also contains curses, and is therefore a good example of the occurrence of curses in the Safaitic funerary inscriptions.

The most common term used in the curses in Safaitic inscriptions is *ʿwr*. It is primarily attested as follows: *w* + *h* + a divine name + *ʿwr* (imperative form of the II stem) + *lḏ yʿwr* (II stem) + this inscription or drawing, *etc.* (*e.g.* WH, 642 ; Libyan Period 334). In addition to the meaning 'blind, to strike blind', the term *ʿwr* in Arabic also has the meaning 'to injure, destroy'.

It is interesting to find the North Arabian term *lʿn* instead of *ʿwr* in the Safaitic curse formulae in the same position and function. The following inscription illustrates this: *lḥṭst bn ʿwḏ hḫl whlt lʿn ḏḫbl* 'For Ḥaṭasat, son of ʿAwīḏ, [these] horses. And, O Allāt curse anyone who may destroy [the drawings]' (Littmann 1940: no. 29, *cf.* also LP 360). The term *lʿn* is attested in Thamudic inscriptions as well (Harding 1952: 494).

These pieces of evidence suggest that the term *ʿwr* may have had a broader meaning similar to *lʿn,* and that it seems to have the same function as the South Arabian term *qmʿ*. An expression which could be interpreted as a blessing also appears in the Safaitic inscriptions. The curse (*ʿwr*) occurs here in apposition to *slm* (literally 'deliver') in the function of a blessing.

Curses are attested several times in the Aramaic inscriptions of Hatra (Aggoula 1991: 185). Here, they have the same general characters as the Northwest Semitic curse, and it seems that all the deities of Hatra, such as Šaḥru Māran, Mārtan, Bar Baʿlšamīn and Atargatis, were invoked to curse evildoers. Sometimes the deities are invoked to curse anyone who may destroy a statute (Aggoula 1991: no. 74). In another inscription, the curse of the god Māran is invoked on him who reads the writing but does not mention the authors of the inscription in

blessing (Aggoula 1991, no. 101). Furthermore, the inscription Aggoula 281 says that the deities' curse is directed against anyone who may steal the property of the god Bar Māryan, such as a tent, an axe or a water-skin. The term for curse here is *bgn*.

Curses are also found in the Old Syriac inscriptions. One inscription reads : 'anyone who removes the bones in this tomb is threatened with a bad end and the curse of the god Mārlāhā (*mrʾlhʾ*)' (Drijvers 1972, 35 A/ 4-6).

The following are two examples from the Northwest Semitic burial inscriptions. The first is a passage from the Phoenician inscription of Aḥīram. It runs as follows: 'And if a king among kings or a governor among governors or a commander of an army should come up to Byblos and uncover this coffin, may the sceptre of his rule be torn away, may the throne of his kingdom be smashed' (Crawford 1992: 116*f*.).

The second is in an Aramaic funerary inscription from Nerab: 'Whoever you are who do evil and move me away, may Sahar and Nikkāl and Nusku make your dying dreadful, and may your offspring perish' (Crawford 1992: 114*f*.).

Conclusion

Two major types of curse are known in South Arabia: curses against enemy spells and those against the violation of graves. It is clear that these South Arabian curses are similar in function to those used in other ancient Near Eastern societies. They can be considered as primarily performative having the function of punishing evildoers as well as protecting the graves and monuments.

To the people of the ancient Near East, curses functioned as a kind of social regulator for maintaining the taboos of society, and this was no different in ancient Yemen.

Sigla of the inscriptions cited

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CIAS	*Corpus des inscriptions et antiquités sud-arabes.* Louvain.
CIH	*Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum. Pars quarta. Inscriptiones himyariticas et sabaeas continens.* Paris 1889-1932. 6 vols.
DNWSI	Hoftijzer, J. & Jongeling, K., *Dictionary of the North-West Semitic Inscriptions*, II vols., (Handbuch der Orientalistik), Leiden 1995.
J	Jamme
Lane	Lane, E. *An Arabic-English Lexicon.* London 1863-93.
LP	Littmann, E. *Semitic Inscriptions*, Section
C.	*Safaitic Inscriptions.* Leiden 1943.
RÉS	*Répertoire d'épigraphie sémitique.* V-VIII. Paris 1900-68. 8 vols
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SSI	Gibson, J.C.L., *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions*, vol. 2 Aramaic Inscriptions, Oxford 1975.
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